

Springfield nondiscrimination law draws crowd

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SPRINGFIELD, Mo. (AP) — A proposal to prohibit discrimination in housing, employment and public accommodations based on sexual orientation and gender identity drew an overflow crowd to a Springfield city council meeting, with testimony nearly evenly divided between opponents and supporters of the ordinance.

After hearing testimony for three hours from more than 60 people, the city council ended debate and will take it up again in two weeks, when council members might vote on the issue, The Springfield News-Leader reported (<http://sgfnw.co/PhvyOq>).

Of the hundreds who filled the council chamber and spilled out into the hallways, 77 people signed up to speak, 45 in favor and 31 against the ordinance. Because of time constraints, 13 of those people weren't able to address the council.

Opponents and supporters cited their religious beliefs and the potential impact on businesses for their views on the ordinance.

"This ordinance is about protecting against unlawful discrimination," said Andrew McIntyre, a gay man.

But Keith Bales, a youth pastor at Cherry Street Baptist Church, asked "Do we need to infringe on the rights of a major segment of our community in order to make this change?"

Many supporters said the ordinance was important to their families.

"One of our children is gay and one of our children is not," said Kathy Munsinger. "I support (the ordinance) because they both deserve equal rights to housing and employment in their hometown."

Speakers Leta Panagides and Michael Stout both said the ordinance would help Springfield businesses attract and retain talent by encouraging diversity.

But former councilman Nick Ibarra said government should not force business owners to violate their spiritual beliefs. If the ordinance is passed, he said, "What exactly is it the government cannot violate when it comes to our personal rights and beliefs?"

Dave Myers, of political action committee Live Free Springfield, said there is "almost no documented evidence" of discrimination against gay and lesbian residents but several examples of businesses being sued when nondiscrimination ordinances are passed.

Another speaker, Phil Snider, compared the ordinance to the fights for equality during the civil rights era, substituting references to homosexuality into speeches given by religious leaders in that era that claimed a religious right to discriminate based on race.

"I hope you will stand on the right side of history" and approve the ordinance, he told the council.

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